Fourth Presbyterian Church
126 East Chestnut Street/ Chicago Illinois 60611 (312) 787 4570

December 20, 1991

Dr. James W. Cox
Lester Professor of Preaching
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
2825 Lexington Rd.
Louisville, KY 40280

Dear Dr. Cox:

I am enclosing a copy of a sermon preached by John Buchanan, Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, on Sunday, December 15, 1991. In my opinion this is one of the most outstanding sermons I have heard. I believe it is worthy of consideration for annual Best Sermons competition.

If something further needs to be done to expedite this process, please let me know.

Every good wish to you for a blessed Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Yours sincerely,

Elam Davies
Pastor Emeritus

Enclosure

Fourth
Presbyterian
Church
126 East Chestnut Street/ Chicago Illinois 60611 (312) 787 4570

January 14, 1991

Best Sermons
P. O. Box 6029
Louisville, KY 40207

Judges for the Contest:

Enclosed is a copy of Getting Your Priorities Right, a sermon I preached in 1990 and am submitting for consideration in "The Fifth Annual Best Sermons Competition."

Thank you for this opportunity and for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

John M Buchanan

John M. Buchanan

JMB:k

Enclosure

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HarperCollins*Publishers*

Icehouse One—401
151 Union Street
San Francisco, California
94111-1299

Telephone 415 477-4400
Fax 415 421-5865

HarperSanFrancisco

October 29, 1991

The Rev. John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church
126 E Chestnut
Chicago IL 60611

Dear Rev. Buchanan:

I am pleased to tell you that your sermon, GETTING YOUR PRIORITIES RIGHT, has been selected by the judges as an Honorable Mention in the Devotional category of the Best Sermons 5 competition. Over 2000 sermons were entered in the contest!

I ask you to sign both copies of the enclosed Best Sermons agreement and return one copy to me. Also, please fill out the Best Sermons Winner Biographical Information form and return it with the signed agreement. Please return these forms to me as soon as possible.

We would also like to have a quality photograph of you. The photograph can be sent to me by separate mail, sometime within the next month.

Winners of the Best Sermons 5 competition will be announced to the public after April 1, 1992, when the book Best Sermons 5 is published. We must ask you and your immediate family, in the meantime, not to disclose to anyone that you are a winner!

When we have received your signed agreement and the completed biographical information form, we will send you the packet of information for you to select your prize books.

Thank you for your sermon and congratulations again on being selected a winner.

Sincerely yours,

John B. Shopp

John B. Shopp
Senior Editor

Devotional

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church
126 E. Chestnut
Chicago, IL 60611

GETTING YOUR PRIORITIES RIGHT

Luke 16:10-13

In his memoir, The Good Times, Russell Baker, New York Times correspondent and columnist, begins with an amusing observation about his mother who died years ago, but still roams free in his mind, and wakes him some mornings before daybreak. He hears her saying...

> "'If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a quitter.' I have heard her say that all my life. Now, lying in bed, coming awake in the dark, I feel the fury of her energy fighting the good-for-nothing idler within me who wants to go back to sleep instead of tackling the brave new day.
>
> "Silently I protest: I am not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I am entitled to sleep late.
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> "'Russell, you've got no more gumption than a bump on a log. Don't you want to amount to something?'
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> "She has hounded me with these same battle cries since I was a boy in short pants back in the Depression.
>
> "'Amount to something!'
>
> "'Make something of yourself!'
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> "'Don't be a quitter!'"[1]

The book strikes a familiar chord with people whose values, hopes, dreams and expectations have been shaped by the American experience in the middle of the twentieth century, which means most of us. We either lived through the Great Depression, or were raised by parents who did, or at least by parents whose values were very much shaped by that economic trauma. Those values are frugality, responsibility, a suspicion of credit and an aversion to indebtedness, most of all a sense that survival means hard work, the willingness to delay gratification and to work very, very hard. Russell Baker's mother's litany - "make something of yourself, work hard, don't quit, get ahead" is familiar to all of us, I suspect, and still drives many of us.

It may, in fact, define us more accurately than we suspect, or even want to know about.

Each of us has a <u>center</u> of value, on the basis of which our lesser values gain their meaning. That center of value, said the late H. Richard Niebuhr, is essentially theological, whether or not we are traditionally religious. It is our god. Russell Baker is candid enough to identify his mother's litanies as his center in a way that helps us identify our own. The point is that each of us has one - a center of value which forms our other values, which shapes our hopes and dreams and expectations for the future, even our ultimate future. That is to say, each of us has a god.

And that is the point of what is arguably the most troublesome story Jesus ever told: certainly one of the most intriguing. If the "charming rascal" is one of your favorite literary character types, you're going to love the man in this story. He's a steward, an estate manager actually, in the employ of a wealthy land owner. The land owner leases his property to

tenant farmers whose rent is a percentage of the produce they harvest from the land. The steward's job is to manage the systems for the owner: negotiate the percentages, keep the books, collect the produce at harvest time. It is an important job. The owner depends on his steward's effectiveness and most of all, honesty.

This particular steward, said Jesus, was charged with wasting his master's goods. The owner called him in, gave him notice, told him to bring the books up to date, clear out his desk, move on. He was fired.

The man does not argue, explain or plead his case. Instead, without wasting a moment, he goes to his office, summons the tenants one by one, who do not know apparently that he has been fired and announces that the percent they owe has been reduced and the landlord has lowered the rent. The implication is that he, the steward, has been instrumental in arranging this happy surprise. The farmers are delighted. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

When the land owner discovers what has happened he has only two options. He can jail the dishonest steward and reverse the damage done - but there's already a celebration going on in the town square. His tenant farmers are, at the moment, perhaps at the pub, lifting their glasses to toast his generosity and his steward's kindness. He decides not to tell them it is a mistake and that their good friend is under arrest.

The other option is to absorb the loss, essentially to pay the price himself for his steward's salvation. That is what he does. He shows unusual mercy - amazing grace - and then he commends the steward for his shrewdness, his sense of priority.

It is a subtle point... God's amazing and dependable graciousness, God's unexpected and always surprising willingness to love us and accept us. This man is not a moral model for anyone. But, to his everlasting credit, he does know what the most important issue in life is and where to take it. He knows somehow that he can depend, utterly and ultimately on the generosity and grace of his master.[2]

And then, in case we miss the point, Luke reports an intriguing saying of Jesus':

"No servant can serve two masters,
you cannot serve God and mammon."

Mammon - what a great Biblical word. It's money, but it's more than money. It's the mystique of money, the essence of wealth. It's money in capital letters. It's the gorgeous ads in the Sunday supplement... It's trudging across an acre of lush Kentucky Blue Grass to borrow a cup of Johnny Walker Black Label from your neighbor. It's a car you never quite get to see because its name is Infiniti. It's a culture that invests its most creative architecture no longer in cathedrals but vertical shopping malls. Mammon is whatever shapes your dreams. It is your center of value. It is whatever you worship. It is whatever you expect to save you.

Mammon is defined by Russell Baker and children of the Depression as accomplishment, success, security. Comedian George Carlin, who would probably be surprised to be used as a sermon illustration, defines it as "stuff" - the accumulation of things for which we must provide space: shelves and drawers and garages and walls and cabinets and boxes and trunks. Mammon is defined for many of us, at least partially, by the word comfort. Being comfortable is more important than we realize, therefore more powerful in actually determining our values and our behavior.

Another contemporary variation on the old theme of mammon might be called "self-fulfillment." "Pollster Daniel Yankelovich estimates that as much as 80 percent of us are in some way involved in the quest for fulfillment. 17 percent... spend much of their time assessing and reassessing their personal lives, their jobs, and friends, and mates, from the perspective of the needs and wants of the self.... They are the ones most preoccupied with finding spiritual, mental, and physical wholeness through diet, exercise, meditation, psychotherapy... and many have stumbled into... the 'fulfillment trap,' wanting more than they can have and putting self ahead of social relationships."[3]

Jesus would put it this way - "You cannot serve two masters." Theologically, you can't serve God and mammon. It's not that mammon is bad. Jesus has been consistently misunderstood on that point. He did not condemn wealth in and of itself. He did not condemn ambition or hard work. He told one wealthy young man to sell all he had and give to the poor, but that was a particular prescription, not a universal model. What he said here is that wealth, or any form of mammon, doesn't work if we look to it for our salvation. It's that simple. It doesn't work. And there is a sense that people who have it know it best.

Harvard professor Harvey Cox observes that there is a revival of Eastern spirituality in Western culture precisely because materialism doesn't work as a source of ultimate meaning or salvation. Professor Cox notes that Young Urban Professionals are "victims of a painful overload of contradiction" between the stated value systems of our society and the actual values which operate in the marketplace. "They are pulled apart. In family and religious life they have been taught to share and cooperate

and even to love, but the world of classroom and market requires them to connive and compete if they wish to succeed."

Cox says one of the appealing resolutions for many thoughtful young adults is a vigorous, disciplined, cult-type religiosity which provides "...a chance to test and stretch themselves as opposed to the debilitating pursuit of comfort that is the chief characteristic of consumer culture."[4]

Mammon doesn't work. The first rule of economics someone said is that "you can't have everything." You have to choose. Individuals and nations. Priorities must be established. In theological terms, a god must be chosen and served.

Saying yes to God, that is, means saying no to other gods. It is a matter of very basic theology.

The trouble with us, the Bible concludes, is that we are always getting our priorities confused. We are looking for the meaning of our lives in the wrong places. In the Biblical idiom the trouble with mammon is not that it is evil. The trouble is that it doesn't work. In fact, all that mammon is good for is producing worry and anxiety. If your job is the most important thing in the world to you, you're going to worry a lot about it. If it's your house, your automobile, your position in the community, your sex life, your children, you're probably worrying a lot.

One of the basic insights of our faith is this: if you try to squeeze something infinite out of something finite, you will not only be unsuccessful and frustrated, you will very likely squeeze the life out as well. One of the lessons in life that parents must learn is that if children are expected to provide peace, happiness, contentment, the load will be too heavy for the relationship to bear. If your ego, your sense of self-worth, is dependent on your child's accomplishments, athletically,

academically, economically or socially, the child involved is being asked to carry a very heavy load. In fact, it won't work. Or if your happiness is dependent on your apartment or automobile, you're in trouble spiritually. And the ultimate irony is that if you look to mammon, the mystique of wealth, prosperity and security to provide happiness, peace and salvation, you probably will not ever enjoy very much of what you already have.

The truth of the matter is that you and I only deeply enjoy what we don't ultimately need. The truth is that it is not possible to enjoy that which you depend on. Psychologists know that obsessive need - dependence - is not a strong basis for a healthy relationship. The truth is that children are far better off when parents do not need them for ego fulfillment. And they are far more enjoyable - which may be one of the reasons grandparents so absolutely enjoy their grandchildren.

The truth is that you cannot enjoy anything if you load it up with expectations and demands and insist that it reward you with happiness, peace and contentment. You can't enjoy anything that exerts that kind of power over you. You can't enjoy your sexuality if you look to it to demonstrate your masculinity or femininity or attractiveness or youth. You won't enjoy romance or friendship or family affection if you need it to provide something to yourself. And mammon as money... Frederick Buechner quips that "There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up."[5]

Jesus told a story about a man who was as flawed as anyone in the Bible and as human as anyone I know, but a man who knew at least where his salvation would be found. He concluded it by teaching us that it is a matter of very great importance that we get our priorities straight.

If we give our hearts to mammon, whatever that might be for us, we will not be happy and, in the process, we will miss the saving miracle of God's unusual generosity, God's amazing grace, God's unconditional love for us which is, he taught, the only source of our salvation.

The radical word of Christian faith, to would-be disciples in first century Galilee and would-be disciples in the 20th century is that in order to experience salvation we must say "no" to all the other gods who clamor for our love and hope and faith and enthusiasm and passion, and say "yes" to the God who has loved us into being and came to be among us and to teach us and to live and die with us and to rise again for us in Jesus Christ.

We are God's top priority it would seem. God has decided to love us, to give us life and the capacity for love and joy and peace. God has decided to give us life eternal, life in all its fullness, life blessed by beauty, life with all its potential for creativity and accomplishment, life with its wonderful capacity for love and passion and intimacy and ecstasy, life - which in Jesus Christ is diminished by nothing, limited and hemmed in ultimately by no thing, not even death. That's what God has decided about us, we believe. And after all the deciding, God made one more decision, namely to allow you the final one, the big one, the only one actually. **Who will you serve?... Who will be your God?...**

NOTES

[1]Russell Baker, The Good Times (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1989), 7.

[2]Kenneth E. Bailey, Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 86 ff.

[3]Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, American Mainline Religion (New Brunswick and London: 1987), 47.

[4]Harvey Cox, Many Mansions (Boston: Beacon Press), 189.

[5]Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers), 80.

Proof copy

GETTING YOUR PRIORITIES RIGHT

CHICAGO SUNDAY EVENING CLUB

RECORDING JANUARY 14, 1990

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

Scripture
Luke 16:10-13

"No servant can serve two masters;... You cannot serve God and mammon."
--Luke 16:13 (RSV)

In his memoir, The Good Times, Russell Baker, New York Times correspondent and columnist, begins with an amusing observation about his mother who died years ago, but still roams free in his mind, and wakes him some mornings before daybreak. He hears her saying...

> "'If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a quitter.' I have heard her say that all my life. Now, lying in bed, coming awake in the dark, I feel the fury of her energy fighting the good-for-nothing idler within me who wants to go back to sleep instead of tackling the brave new day...
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> "Silently I protest. I am not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I am entitled to sleep late.
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> "She has hounded me with these same battle cries since I was a boy in short pants back in the Depression.
>
> "Amount to something!
>
> "Make something of yourself!
>
> "Don't be a quitter!"

Baker tells how in 1954, at the age of 29, he was assigned to cover the White House - as close to complete success as a correspondent could get. He went home to Baltimore to tell his mother about it.

"I should have known better. 'Well, Russ,' she said, 'if you work hard at this White House job you might be able to make something of yourself.'" [p. 7-8]

The book strikes a familiar chord with people whose values, hopes, dreams and expectations have been shaped by the American experience in the middle of the twentieth century, which means most of us. We either lived through the Great Depression, or were raised by parents who did, or at least by parents whose values were very much shaped by that economic trauma. Those values are frugality, responsibility, a suspicion of credit and an aversion to indebtedness, most of all a sense that survival means hard work, the willingness to delay gratification and to work very, very hard. Russell Baker's mother's litany - "make something of yourself, work hard, don't quit, get ahead" is familiar to all of us, I suspect, and still drives many of us.

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And that is the point of what is arguably the most troublesome story Jesus ever told: certainly one of the most intriguing. If the "charming rascal" is one of your favorite literary character types, you're going to love the man in this story. He's a steward, an estate manager actually, in the employ of a wealthy land owner. The land owner leases his property to tenant farmers whose rent is a percentage of the produce they harvest from the land. The steward's job is to manage the systems for the owner: negotiate the percentages, keep the books, collect the produce at harvest time. It is an important job. The owner depends on his steward's effectiveness and most of all, honesty.

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It is a subtle point... God's amazing and dependable graciousness. God's unexpected and always surprising willingness to love us and accept us. This man is not a moral model for anyone. But, to his everlasting credit, he does know what the most important issue in life is and where to take it. He knows somehow that he can depend, utterly and ultimately on the generosity and grace of his master. [See Poet and Peasant. Kenneth Bailey, p. 86 ff]

And then, in case we miss the point, Luke reports as an intriguing saying of Jesus':

> "No servant can serve two masters,
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Mammon - what a great Biblical word. It's money, but it's more than money. It's the mystique of money, the essence of wealth. It's money in capital letters. It's the gorgeous ads in the Sunday supplement... It's trudging across an acre of lush Kentucky Blue Grass to borrow a cup of Johnny Walker Black Label from your neighbor. It's a car you never quite get to see because its name is Infiniti. It's a culture that invests its most creative architecture no longer in cathedrals but vertical shopping malls. Mammon is whatever shapes your dreams. It is your center of value. It is whatever you worship. It is whatever you expect to save you.

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New ¶—The trouble with us, the Bible concludes is that we are always getting our priorities confused. We are looking for the meaning of our lives in the wrong places. In the Biblical idiom the trouble with mammon is not that it is evil. The trouble is that it doesn't work. In fact, all that mammon is good for is producing worry and anxiety. If your job is the most important thing in the world to you, you're going to worry a lot about it. If it's your house, your automobile, your position in the community, your sex life, your children, you're probably worrying a lot.

One of the most important lessons of life and one of the basic insights of Judeo-Christian religion is this: if you try to squeeze something infinite out of something finite, you will not only be unsuccessful and frustrated, you will very likely squeeze the life out as well. One of the lessons in life that parents must learn is that if children are expected to provide peace, happiness, contentment, the load will be too heavy for the relationship to bear. If your ego, your sense of self-worth, is dependent on your child's accomplishments, athletically, academically, economically or socially, the child involved is being asked to carry a very heavy load. In fact, it won't work. Or if your happiness

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Fourth
Presbyterian
Church
126 East Chestnut Street/ Chicago Illinois 60611 (312) 787 4570

January 9, 1992

Dr. James W. Cox – hm: 502-635-2967
Lester Professor of Preaching
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary — 502-897-4011
2825 Lexington Rd.
Louisville, KY 40280

Dear Dr. Cox:

Greetings for the New Year!

I am enclosing a copy of a sermon preached by John Buchanan, Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, on Sunday, December 8, 1991. I believe this is a sermon that you will wish to review because in my opinion it is of excellent quality and worthy of consideration for annual Best Sermons competition.

If something further needs to be done to expedite this process, please contact Ms. Jeanette Krenek, Administrative Assistant to Dr. Buchanan.

Every good wish.

Sincerely,

Elam Davies
Pastor Emeritus

Enclosure